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The 2017 Norwegian election

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Although the *Storting* election of 11 September 2017 reduced the number of seats backing the incumbent conservative government, it still gave the two governing parties and their supporting centre-right parties a parliamentary majority. Thus, Prime Minister Solberg's premiership will continue after the election. In the previous period, the government could secure a parliamentary majority with either of the two centrist parties; the Liberal Party or the Christian Democrats. After the 2017 election, they will need the support of both parties to secure a majority, unless they can get help from one or more of the centre-left opposition parties. When Solberg formed her government back in 2013, the populist right-wing Progress Party entered government for the first time. Even Progress Party leaders feared that they would lose support from anti-establishment voters. Poor turnout at the 2015 local election did not bode well.¹ However, the Progress Party did far better in the 2017 national elections and lost only 1.1 percentage points and two seats compared with the 2013 election. A major success factor for the Progress Party was the attention given to immigration issues during the election campaign (see below). At the previous election, in 2013, the Green Party won a seat for the first time, increasing the number of parties in parliament from seven to eight.² In 2017, the far-left Red Party increased the number of parties from eight to nine.³ Despite the re-election of the incumbent government, the election signalled a shift to the left, even to the left of the Labour Party.⁴

Background to the election

In Norway, the electoral periods are fixed at four-year intervals. There are no provisions for dissolving the parliament and calling for new elections between ordinary elections. Elections are held on the second Monday in September. Norway has a proportional system with 19 constituencies, which are also the regional administrative units (counties or *fylker*). The geographical distribution

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of 169 seats is based on a combined sum of inhabitants and area in square kilometres.⁵ Due to the vast distances between the capital city and more peripheral areas, the geographical allocation of seats has been skewed in favour of the periphery since the establishment of the modern Norwegian state in 1814. In fact, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) has criticised Norway for having too skewed a geographical allocation of seats (2009). In particular, the northernmost county, Finnmark, is heavily overrepresented. It now has five seats, but would have only two if the distribution was strictly population-based. On the other hand, there are historic reasons for the overrepresentation of Finnmark. It has a sizeable indigenous population, the Samis, and it is the most peripheral part of Norway, in the sense that it is further from the nation's capital than any other county. The Samis in particular and Finnmark in general have been underprivileged through large parts of the country's history.

Seats in parliament are distributed to parties according to the modified Sainte-Lague method, with a first divisor of 1.4. Of the overall 169 seats, 150 are distributed to the parties in 19 separate constituency competitions. In addition, 19 adjustment or compensatory seats are distributed nationally to parties with large numbers of unrepresented votes after the constituency allocations. In order to compete for the adjustment seats, parties need at least 4% of the national vote. The last seat in each constituency is set aside as an adjustment seat. After allocating the adjustment seats to the parties, these seats are distributed among the constituencies based on each party's remaining votes divided by the average number of votes per seat in that constituency⁶ (see Aardal 2011 for details of the electoral system).

Although there is a theoretical chance that voters may influence the choice of candidates on the party lists (through preferential voting), the Norwegian system is de facto a closed list system. Voter influence on the choice of candidates on the party lists has been proposed several times, but has not yet gained a sufficient majority in parliament.

In sum, with an average index value of 3.0 of Gallagher's least squares index for the last four elections the electoral system is not among the most proportional of systems. In 2017, the value was 3.24.⁷

Most parliamentary elections in Norway are to some extent a referendum on the incumbent government. The inclusion of the populist right Progress Party in the government in 2013 was controversial, and presented the parties on the centre-left with an opportunity to highlight their differences with the government. It is not clear that the opposition parties succeeded in this. Though the government has often been criticised in the four years since its inception in 2013, it has generally received a pass grade from voters according to opinion polls.

The main challenges for the government in the past four years were probably, first, the falling oil price in 2015 which led to a moderate rise in unemployment in the south-west part of the country where much of the oil sector is located. Second, the refugee crisis in the autumn of 2015 presented the government with

the challenge of starkly rising numbers of asylum seekers. Finally, the annual process of passing a budget in parliament became something of a crisis in every instance. The compromises that had to be made, and the semi-public negotiations between the centrist parties (the Liberals and the Christian Democrats) and the two governing parties (the Conservatives and the Progress Party), strained relations within this coalition, and sometimes cast doubt on whether it would survive until the next election (in 2017).

However, the government did survive, unemployment gradually crept downwards, and the refugee crisis passed into history. In the lead-up to the 2017 election campaign, therefore, the sitting government was reasonably popular, and did not struggle with any crises of major proportions.

The polls in early 2017 were close between the four centre-right parties and the opposition centre-left, but with a slight edge to the centre-left. At the time, it seemed as though the Labour Party might be able to form a government, with the support of other centre-left parties, including the resurgent Centre Party.

The Centre Party represents rural interests in Norway and the party benefited from a popular opposition to several reforms that the government was in the process of implementing. This included a reform of municipal and regional amalgamation, and a police reform. The Solberg government saw these policies as a necessary tool to modernise governing institutions, and to be able to provide better services to people. Others, including the Centre Party, saw the reforms as a means of centralising government, and of taking power and services away from local communities.

Election campaigns in Norway get started in earnest in mid-August, about a month before Election Day.⁸ This year, there was a bit of a precursor to the political campaign over the summer, when several intellectuals and politicians engaged in a debate about the meaning of 'Norwegian values' and the role of Christianity in society. This debate was an opportunity for both the Christian Democratic Party and the Progress Party to engage in a discussion of some of their key concerns and policies. However, when the actual election campaign got started and most voters started paying attention, this debate faded away.

The Labour Party tried to make employment policy and economic policy central issues in the campaign. That message probably did reach quite a few voters, because these issues are among the key concerns mentioned by voters in the preliminary results from the Norwegian National Election Study (NNES) (see Table 1). Nevertheless, Labour's strategy of focusing on economic issues was not entirely successful; in part because there was no sense of economic crisis in Norway at the time. Moreover, Labour suffered a dramatic decline in the public opinion polls early in the campaign. This became an issue in itself, and throughout the campaign Labour politicians were faced with questions about why the party was declining. This narrative on Labour's decline took up quite a bit of media coverage until Election Day and beyond.

Table 1. The most important issues in the election according to voters, in 2013 and 2017 (%).

	2013	2017	Change
Health care	23	17	-6
Schools and education	22	21	-1
Transportation/infrastructure	15	7	-8
The environment	14	20	6
Taxes	14	23	9
Eldercare	13	12	-1
Immigration	12	28	16
Children and family policy	8	5	-3
Employment and the economy	7	18	11
Rural policy	7	9	2
Left-right economic issues	5	4	-1
Economic inequality	3	6	3
N	1772	4943	

Note: The results are based on an open survey question, the answers to which are then coded into general categories: 'Can you name one or two issues which had particular influence on the way you voted?'

Another dominant media narrative in the campaign involved the Progress Party and immigration policy. The Minister of Immigration and Integration, Sylvi Listhaug from the Progress Party, payed a high-profile visit to a suburb of Stockholm, Sweden, in the middle of the campaign. The suburb (Rinkeby) has a large immigrant population, social problems such as crime and high unemployment, and is sometimes used by people who favour stricter immigration policies as a symbol of a liberal immigration policy gone wrong. The Listhaug visit received large-scale media coverage in both Sweden and Norway, and it stirred up a debate about immigration and integration policy, which then became a key issue in the campaign.

The importance of the immigration issue is evident in Table 1, which displays the 'most important issues' in the election, according to preliminary data from the NNES. No other issue is mentioned as frequently by voters as immigration, and there is a steep rise in the importance of the issue since the last election in 2013. In fact, the immigration issue has been by far more important for voters in 2017 than in any previous Norwegian National Election Study.⁹

The second most important issue for voters, if ranked by how often it is mentioned, is tax policy. Both the Conservative Party and the Progress Party hold significant issue-ownership on these issues. Education, the environment, the economy and health care then follow as important concerns for voters. All of these issues tend to be important ones in any Norwegian election campaign, though it is notable that environmental policy is high up on the list of concerns in 2017. It is an issue that Norwegian politicians spend a good deal of time discussing, and it is the foundational issue for the Green Party, whose breakthrough in national politics came in 2013.

The results

In sum, the four parties supporting the incumbent government (Conservatives, Progress, Liberals and Christian Democrats) lost 5.1 percentage points and eight seats (see Table 2). Their parliamentary majority was reduced from 96 to 88 seats (out of 169 seats). The Liberal Party and the Christian Democrats barely passed the threshold of 4% for the adjustment seats; which is crucial for smaller parties in Norway (see section on the electoral system, below). In practice, this means that a 0.6% lower share of the votes would not only have cost them nine seats altogether, but would also have meant the end of the conservative government. Our preliminary data from the NNES indicates that the Liberal Party lost a substantial share of their voters to centre-left parties. The party was pushed above the 4% threshold by previous Conservative Party voters who opted for the Liberal Party in 2017. It seems likely that at least some of these voters supported the Liberal Party for ‘tactical’ reasons – i.e. to get the party above 4% – and thereby save the centre-right majority in parliament.

The big winner in the election was the Centre Party which gained 4.8 percentage points and went from 10 to 19 representatives. The other winners were the Socialist Left Party with an increase of 1.9 percentage points and four seats, and the Red Party with 1.3 percentage points and one seat. In sum, opposition parties on the centre-left gained 8 percentage points and 14 seats. A ‘normal’ showing of the largest opposition party, Labour, would have given the opposition parties a clear majority. However, Labour witnessed its second lowest election result since 1924, with only 27.4% of the votes, losing 3.4 percentage points and six seats.

Seemingly, Labour’s poor showing fits in with an international trend where social-democratic parties are experiencing a consistent drop in voter support in Western Europe. However, less than a year before the election, Labour scored an average of 36% in the opinion polls. In addition, the drop in support seems

Table 2. Elections to the Norwegian parliament, September 2017.

	2017%	2017 votes	2013%	Change	2017seats	2013%	Change
Labour Party	27.4	800,947	30.8	–3.4	49	55	–6
Conservative Party	25.0	732,895	26.8	–1.8	45	48	–3
Progress Party	15.2	444,681	16.3	–1.1	27	29	–2
Christian Democrats	4.2	122,797	5.6	–1.4	8	10	–2
Centre Party	10.3	302,017	5.5	+4.8	19	10	+9
Liberal Party	4.4	127,910	5.2	–0.8	8	9	–1
Socialist Left Party	6.0	176,222	4.1	+1.9	11	7	+4
Green Party	3.4	94,788	2.8	+0.8	1	1	0
Red Party	2.4	70,522	1.1	+1.3	1	0	+1
Others	1.7	54,057	1.8	–0.1	0	0	0
Turnout	78.2	2,926,836	78.2	0	169	169	
Eligible voters: 3,765,245. Valid votes: 2,945,352. Blank votes: 18,516. Rejected votes: 5179							

to have occurred in two distinct periods. One at the beginning of the 'short' campaign, in early August, and then again just before the election.

The incumbent government consists of two parties, the Conservative Party and the Progress Party. Prime Minister Erna Solberg's hope in 2013 was to establish a four-party majority government. However, after post-election negotiations, the Liberal Party and the Christian Democrats decided not to join the government, due to 'major political differences' with the Progress Party. However, the four parties signed a rather detailed agreement, securing support from the two parties outside the government for the 2013–2017 election period. Although a Norwegian government does not need a formal investiture vote in parliament, the 2013 agreement was close to being an *investiture*. The four-party agreement represented an 'oversized' coalition, as the government only needed the support of one of the two supporting parties at the time. However, this changed in the 2017 election. Now the government needs the support of both the Liberal Party and the Christian Democrats to command a majority. This means that each of them can block government proposals they do not agree with. As of writing (November 2017), the Liberal Party is negotiating with the Conservatives and the Progress Party whether to join the government or not. Irrespective of the outcome of these negotiations, the government will need the support of the Christian Democrats, who have decided not to join the government.

In Norway, all inhabitants are registered in a national database, which also serves as a voter registry. Thus, turnout is calculated as the share of all eligible voters. In the 2017 election, turnout was 78.2%. This is precisely the same turnout as in the previous election, in 2013. It is a little lower than the post-World War II average of 79.9%, but a little higher than the post-2000 average of 77.1%. Turnouts in Norwegian elections are generally lower than in neighbouring Sweden and Denmark, but higher than in Finland.¹⁰

Norwegian voters have been quite volatile in recent years. Figure 1 is based on panel data where the same voters are interviewed at two elections. In addition, information about voting is checked against electoral registers. From the mid-1980s individual volatility increased sharply, reaching a top level of 47% in 2005.¹¹ In recent elections volatility has gone down, but is still relatively high at 37%.¹² At the aggregate level volatility, as measured by the Pedersen index, went down from 14.3% in 2013 to 8.5% in 2017 (Pedersen 1979).

The 2017 Norwegian parliamentary election produced the highest ever share of female representatives in parliament: 70 out of 169 MPs (41.4%). This is an increase of three female MPs since the last session of parliament. This moderate change reflects a general stability in female representation since the early 1990s (see Figure 2). The period from the 1960s until 1993 saw a dramatic rise in the share of female MPs in Norway, followed by a period of relative stability. It took 24 years (from 1993 to 2017) to get above 40%. It should be said, however, that leadership positions in the executive branch (cabinet-level positions), have

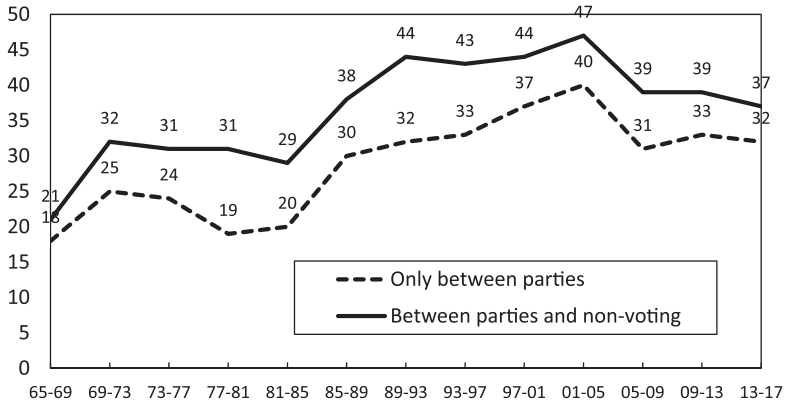


Figure 1. Individual volatility among Norwegian voters 1965–2017.

Note: Based on four-year panels, with the exception of part of the 2013–2017 data.

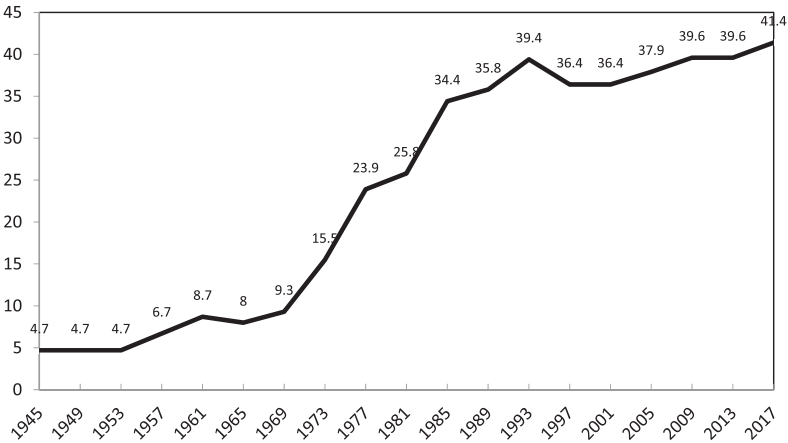


Figure 2. Female representation in the Norwegian parliament (%).

had close to a 50:50 distribution in the entire period. This includes the newly elected Conservative and Progress Party government, in which the three highest ranked positions are all held by women: Prime Minister, Foreign Minister and Minister of Finance.

Conclusion

The Norwegian parliamentary election of 2017 saw the re-election of the Solberg government with a slim margin, and with a more precarious level of support in parliament. Solberg’s government is the first ever to include the populist right-wing Progress Party. The re-election of this government could

therefore be seen as a vindication for Solberg's decision to include the Progress Party in the coalition, and as an indication that voters have given a pass grade to the Progress Party for its performance in government.

The Norwegian economy fared fairly well in 2017, and there were no major crises or scandals involving the incumbent government. The main concerns of voters were immigration, which was raised by Progress Party politicians in the campaign, as well as taxes, education and the environment. Norway's largest party, Labour, suffered a defeat in the polls, which benefited other centre-left parties. The centre-left side of Norwegian politics is more fragmented following the 2017 election.

Some commentators have speculated that the Solberg government may have to resign at some point in the next four years, for instance if one or both of the centrist parties decide to cut a budget deal with the centre-left parties. If that happens, the challenges of forming a stable governing majority on the centre-left side will probably be even greater than they are with the current government, given the fragmented state of the centre-left after the election.

Notes

1. The Progress Party received only 9.5% of the votes in the local elections in 2015.
2. The Green Party was established in 1988.
3. In 1993, the Red Electoral Alliance, a predecessor to the Red Party, won one seat. The Red Party was formed in 2007 in a merger between the Red Electoral Alliance and the Workers' Communist Party.
4. Other recent contributions in the elections in context series include, for example, Lancaster (2017) and Little (2017).
5. The number of inhabitants is added to the size of the electoral district in square kilometres multiplied by 1.8. The pure Sainte-Lague formula (first divisor 1.0) is used for the geographical allocation of seats.
6. The coefficients are sorted according to size and allocated to parties/constituencies in declining order.
7. The government has recently appointed an Electoral Reform Commission to look into several aspects of the electoral system. In particular, a recent administrative reform reducing the number of regional units from 19 to 11 raises the question whether the constituency borders should still follow the administrative units. The Electoral Reform Commission will present its proposal for a new electoral law in late 2019 or early 2020.
8. Parliamentary elections are held every four years (usually on the second Monday) in September.
9. The question about the most important issues in the election has been a part of every election study since 1977.
10. Turnout in the Swedish 2014 election was 85.8% and in the Danish 2015 election 85.9%. In the Finnish 2015 election turnout was 66.9% (<https://www.idea.int/data-tools/question-countries-view/521/39/reg>).
11. Including changes to and from non-voting; 40% switched party.
12. 32% of the voters switched party.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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